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Book review

Chattoo, Caty Borum & Feldman, Lauren (2020). *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

I was very excited to receive an invitation to review *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* as I was already familiar with the works of Caty Chattoo and Lauren Feldman. They take a refreshing stance regarding the role of humour and comedy that is rather rare in western scholarship. Many critics have emphasised that humour is not politically consequential. Chattoo and Feldman, by contrast, undertake to argue that comedy and humour can be employed to bring about social change and advance political causes.

The book opens with two anecdotes about the success of an episode of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and the failure of CDC's "The Zombie Apocalypse" comedic campaign in making tangible impacts on the actual world, in order to illustrate the promises and complexities of using humour for the purpose of persuasion and behavioural change. The authors aver that the book is about "the contemporary intersection of mediated comedy and social justice in the evolving, converged digital media age" (p. 10). It strives to delineate

how media and technological disruption—combined with newly invigorated calls for justice—have created the ideal conditions for boundary-pushing, socially critical comedy to not only thrive in the entertainment marketplace but also play a strategic role in social change efforts (p. 10).

They contend that mediated comedy "is uniquely positioned to confront injustice and re-envision social reality in ways that engage and inspire" (p. 11) and believe that the potentials of comedy for public influence and initiating social change are particularly significant in the digital age when the production and distribution of media is decentralised and less regulated, and its extensive reach is unprecedented.

Having reflected on the reasons behind the recent surge of comedy in the digital age, Chattoo and Feldman observe that the marketplace is increasingly embracing humour that taps into social justice challenges. This is partly due to the diversification of younger audiences, and partly due to evolving market strategies and audience measurement in media corporations. As diverse audiences embrace political topics and fresh comic voices in a historical moment that prominently features struggles for social justice, "contemporary mediated comedy can serve as a site of cultural resistance" (p. 7).

Since trust and interest in authorities and traditional news outlets is declining, citizens increasingly use social and digital media where the boundaries between news and entertainment are blurred. Audiences find a greater degree of freedom and more possibilities for expressing themselves, creating their content, and distributing it on the internet. This, nonetheless, does not necessarily translate into democratising digital outlets, social media, or the public discourse. Nor does it inevitably advance the cause of social justice. Putatively empowering information technology frequently manipulates algorithms that might enhance the vocalisation and distribution of malicious content, hate, and disinformation. This caveat seems more pressing in

the light of the role of Twitter in impacting the political discourse through spreading misinformation at significant historical moments such as elections or health crises, or the recent Facebook scandal brought into public light by the revelations of Frances Haugen who blew the whistle on how Facebook (now Meta) products encourage and prioritise acerbic posts and hate speech because they have a greater potential to go viral and engage a larger number of users.

Chattoo and Feldman do not shy away from asserting that

[c]omedy can help realise the civic imagination, by offering both a new perspective on social reality and a form of social critique. It is, therefore, in lockstep with social justice. Comedy—as a rabidly shared and avidly consumed form of cultural narrative that can introduce new perspectives and new voices in the digital age, and can offer a creatively deviant lens on a problematic status quo—contributes to a new societal portrait by which people shape and interpret meaning (p. 25).

Their primary justification for seeing comedy as a positive change agent is its entertaining quality and potential to reach out to a wide audience. They also maintain that comedy can provide an opportunity for marginalised communities to articulate their identities (p. 26). Subsequently, Chattoo and Feldman attribute many radical, revolutionary, and liberating features and functions to comedy. They specifically identify four primary sources for the impact of comedy. First, comedy attracts the attention of its audience; second, it can “disarm” the audience and increase the odds of persuasion; third, it can “break down social barriers;” and finally, comedy can facilitate the sharing of messages (pp. 13, 38, 41-52, 195-196).

At the same time, they are also cautious to mention that despite its liberating potential, comedy can also reinforce the status quo and existing cultural norms (p. 27). Comedy can challenge and modify stereotypes; at the same time, it can consolidate and further distribute them. The discursive power of humour can be both unifying and polarising. This could be among the reasons why literature is not consistent and conclusive about the persuasive potential of humour. Merely relying on positive affect as a result of the entertaining nature of comedy for its public and social influence, for instance, is not entirely reliable. The impact of positive emotions on the depth of cognitive processing is controversial in persuasion and behavioural change. So is the influence of humour in reducing counterargument, which is shown to be complicated and depending on factors such as the type of humour, the age of the audience, and the strength of the argument. The same subtleties exist in the case of message scrutiny (Boukes et al. 2015; Martin & Ford 2018; Nabi et al. 2007; Skurka et al. 2018, 2019, 2022; Strick & Ford 2021; Young 2008, 2020).

Chapter 1 opens with an anecdote about Lena Waithe’s Emmy Award to illustrate the main argument according to which “today’s comedy is both a product of and contributor to a changing information and entertainment environment—and a cultural moment characterised by social justice upheaval” (p. 18). The Chapter then turns to definitions of key concepts and a history of comedy and social justice. The authors turn to Aristotle, Sigmund Freud, and Simon Critchley for defining humour and exploring its social impact. Chattoo and Feldman dexterously navigate the nuances and overlaps of comedy, humour, and satire. They also clarify how they understand the concept of social justice. For them, the term is “synonymous with active, civically engaged efforts to ensure that all people regardless of inequitable circumstances of birth, physical ability, gender, socioeconomic class, sexual identity, race or ethnicity—have access and opportunity to pursue healthy lives free of unfair treatment” (p. 22). Having surveyed the developments in information technology and its penetration since the noughties, this Chapter closes with a succinct history of American comedy.

Chapter 2 explicates the core argument of the book, namely why comedy can serve as an agent of change. The impact of comedy on its audience is the primary reason why it can make social change happen. This is not to say that exposure to a short comedy sketch can lead to

immediate and sweeping behavioural change since social and behavioural change is a gradual and incremental process. Comedy, however, can “galvanise attention, spark conversation, change how some people think and feel about social issues and groups, and foment activism” (p. 38). These can be part of what might add up to a change in behaviour or compel policymakers to react more effectively to urgent social, political, and ecological issues. Other positive impacts of comedy include, “building public awareness, shaping individual attitudes and behaviours, shifting social norms and practices, encouraging public engagement, setting a media agenda, and influencing policy” (p. 5). This chapter offers more anecdotal evidence for the social impact of comedy.

The next Chapter opens with another anecdote about the response to the police violence against African-Americans in *Black-ish*. This Chapter discusses five types of comedy, namely satirical news, scripted episodic TV, stand-up, sketch, and documentary. After defining each type, Chattoo and Feldman provide a historical perspective, several examples, and evidence for its potentials in influencing its audiences. Part II provides a wealth of materials on comedy that intervened in social issues, specifically climate change and poverty. Both these well-argued Chapters are ground-breaking attempts as there are very few studies on humour concerning environmental issues and socio-economic status. Part III changes the perspective from those of comedy scholars to those of comics. Two Chapters draw on 17 interviews with a wide range of comedians in order to explore how they conceive of their creative activities and if they have a sense of mission in their careers. The last Chapter offers intriguing concluding remarks.

The book is “methodologically diverse” (p. 13) and effectively includes both qualitative and quantitative research. The tables and results of empirical studies are added in the appendix in order to make the experience of reading uninterrupted. *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* is a well-researched and invaluable attempt to foreground the social, political, and environmental impacts of comedy at a historical moment when social and economic inequalities are increasing and Homo sapiens is failing to take decisive action in the Anthropocene. Further research on the role of humour in social and environmental justice can be very intriguing in contexts that go beyond the USA. Narration is yet another significant quality of comedy and humour that Chattoo and Feldman mention. More research can reveal how narrative can be employed for the purpose of advocating behavioural and social change in the age of digital media.

I deeply sympathise with the claim that, “comedy may be a unique force for change in pressing social justice challenges, such as global poverty, immigrant rights, gender equality, and climate change, to name only a few” (p. 5). Chattoo and Feldman also maintain that comedy is correlated with “a host of positive social and democratic outcomes, such as participation, tolerance, and self-efficacy” (p. 44) and that it can be “a practice of empowerment that strengthens and mobilises marginalised communities, ultimately serving as a tool of resistance” (p. 55). While social activists, campaigns, and advertisements continue to use humour, it is not that easy to persuade the scholarly community and policymakers about its potentials for change. Nonetheless, this topic is definitely timely and significant. Chattoo and Feldman are right in saying that comedy, alongside other communication and advocacy strategies, is an invaluable means of engaging the public and promoting social change.

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